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two support ships (carrying aviation/fuel and aircraft stores/ammunition). Various enhancements would be required both for additional self-defence and to enable more effective interoperability with US and other allied forces in the area. Timescales are such that ships would need to be 'fitted to receive' much of this equipment before departure with installation taking place on passage or arrival. The estimated cost of enhancements for the full Carrier Group is up to £12M - it is not yet clear whether the full package can be fitted in the timescale.

6. Embargo operations in the Red Sea are somewhat different in character from those in the Gulf, being primarily concerned with vessels bound for Jordan rather than direct to Kuwait/Iraq. The USN appear to be intercepting all shipping inbound to Aqaba (and possibly all traffic through the Northern Red Sea) and turning away any vessels with cargoes consigned to known or suspected Jordanian companies fronting for Iraq (although in some cases the grounds for suspicion appear limited) and any vessels with any irregularities in their papers or which in any way arouse suspicion of the local commanders. Such vessels are instructed to divert elsewhere for removal of the suspect cargo if they wish to proceed into Aqaba. These operations naturally give rise to a greater number of boardings (about 6 a day) and to searches at sea than in the Gulf. The length of time taken to process ships (including innocent vessels) has also given rise to a number of complaints. If the UK were to take over responsibility for these operations we would need to satisfy ourselves that there was a firm legal basis for this approach or to devise an alternative concept of operations.

7. My intention would be to deploy ARK ROYAL, which was in any event planned to be deployed to the Mediterranean this month.

Even so, the Group could not be on station until late January (and to ensure there is no further delay we need as a matter of urgency to set in hand the necessary enhancements). Whilst this timescale may not be ideal in terms of permitting the full benefits of relieving the US CVGB well in advance of hostilities, the Pentagon has confirmed that they would, despite this, continue to request the deployment. The deployment of a UK Carrier Group would have the added advantage of providing us with a valuable and flexible capability in theatre for a number of possible requirements, particularly in the aftermath of hostilities. In addition, and quite apart from the military value of the deployment, it would be useful political gesture to the US, particularly at the moment.

8. We would need to discuss the exact mission with the US as a matter of urgency and to draw up an appropriate concept of operations and Rules of Engagement. In order not to delay the arrival of the Group this could be done while it was en route but we would need to explain to the Americans at the outset that we would not necessarily expect to carry out operations in precisely the way they have done.

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12(A-c) 6/7a



MINISTER OF STATE FOR
THE ARMED FORCES

D/MIN(AF)/AH/5/3/30A

PRIME MINISTER

US REQUEST FOR THE DEPLOYMENT OF A UK CVS GROUP TO THE RED SEA

1. In his letter of 20 November to Mrs Thatcher setting out the options for the reinforcement of UK forces in the Gulf, the Defence Secretary mentioned that he was also considering the possibility of sending a UK Carrier Group to the Red Sea.
2. At that time we had not had a specific request from the Americans for assistance in this respect, and we therefore decided not to consider the matter further. As a follow up to a letter from the US Embassy towards the end of last month, the Director of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Lieutenant General Carns, on behalf of General Powell has, however, now made a firm request for the deployment of a UK Carrier Group to the Red Sea to take over co-ordination of embargo operations there.
3. The USN wish to release their Strike Carrier Battle Group (CVBG) operating in the Red Sea from the distractions of embargo operations as soon as possible in order to concentrate on work up and conduct of offensive operations. Each of the six US CVBGs in the Gulf theatre will have an area of interest of roughly 500 nautical miles in diameter and will be operating up to ninety aircraft at full stretch. They want in particular to ensure that their Operations Staff can devote themselves fully to this primary role.
4. Although we have not so far been able to gain much detailed information on the precise nature of the mission, the basic task of a UK Carrier Group would be to take over co-ordination of embargo operations in the Northern Red Sea. It is not, however, clear what US and other warships would be available to participate.
5. Albeit much smaller and less powerful than a US Strike Carrier, a RN Carrier has excellent Command and Control facilities and its air group is well suited to surface surveillance operations. It would therefore provide an entirely suitable alternative vessel to co-ordinate embargo operations in the Red Sea. An RN Carrier would need to be accompanied by two escorts and to be fully autonomous the Group would also require

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9. Given the uncertainties over the precise role of a UK Carrier Group and the situation in theatre by the time the Group could arrive, it would be necessary at this stage to say publicly that the ARK ROYAL was in any case due to deploy to the Eastern Mediterranean and that as a prudent contingency measure she is being fitted with addition equipment to be available if required at short notice in the Gulf.

10. On that basis I recommend that we should proceed immediately with the deployment of a CVS Group to the Red Sea.

11. I am sending copies of this minute to the members of OPD(G), the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the Attorney-General, and to the Cabinet Secretary.

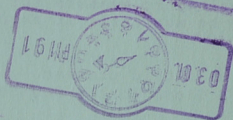


ARCHIE HAMILTON

3d January 1991

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PRIME MINISTER

US REQUEST FOR AN AIRCRAFT CARRIER FOR THE RED SEA

Yes. Content to proceed
as you suggest / 3L

I attach the Minister of State for the Armed Force's minute setting out the case for deploying a UK aircraft carrier (plus two escorts and two support ships) to the Red Sea. In essence the US have asked for this on the military net, and want a UK carrier to take over from the US carrier the job of co-ordinating arrangements for implementing the embargo in the Red Sea. This would free the US carrier for military operations against Iraq.

As such, it is not an unreasonable request. The embargo needs to be co-ordinated. We want the Americans to be able to deploy the maximum possible air power against Iraq. We are deploying a carrier with escorts to the Eastern Mediterranean anyway, as a matter of routine.

But there are a number of points to be weighed in the balance:

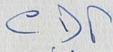
- the request has not come quite so much out of the blue as suggested. The Royal Navy have been trying to send a carrier to the area since August and have been constantly thwarted. There is no doubt that they have been egging on the Americans to make a request.
- It is noteworthy that the request has not been made at the political level, which one would have expected had it really been high priority.
- It is not absolutely self-evident that you need an aircraft carrier with all its escorts to co-ordinate the implementation of the embargo. Its extensive communications and command and control facilities are undoubtedly helpful. But the task could be done by a frigate or destroyer.
- Nor is it absolutely self-evident that it needs to be a British aircraft carrier. We are already contributing heavily to the military effort against Iraq. The French

were keeping a carrier in the area, but it was not doing anything very useful. Could not they be given this task?

- An added reason is that we do not have any British ships engaged in enforcing the embargo in the Red Sea: our effort is concentrated on the Gulf itself. This would in essence be a new commitment for us.
- It will also get us into difficulty with the Jordanians, who resent the way in which the embargo of Aqaba is enforced. We do not really need that just at present.
- Moreover, from the look of Mr. Hamilton's minute, we could be landing ourselves with a host of rather tricky legal issues about embargo enforcement in the Red Sea.
- Finally, it is not absolutely clear that the Defence Secretary himself - who is away - is wholly behind this request. In the past he has been sceptical.

In short, there seem to me to be quite a number of grounds to be cautious about sending a carrier group: and it was frankly absurd of MoD to put the proposition to you today, claiming that they had to have an answer by the weekend otherwise it would all be too late. I suggest that you ask for some of the points I have outlined above to be examined before any decision is reached. You would also, no doubt, want to be clear that the £12m additional cost will be met within the MoD's existing funds, although they will probably just lump it on the open-ended Gulf budget.

Agree to proceed in this way?



CHARLES POWELL

3 JANUARY 1991

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